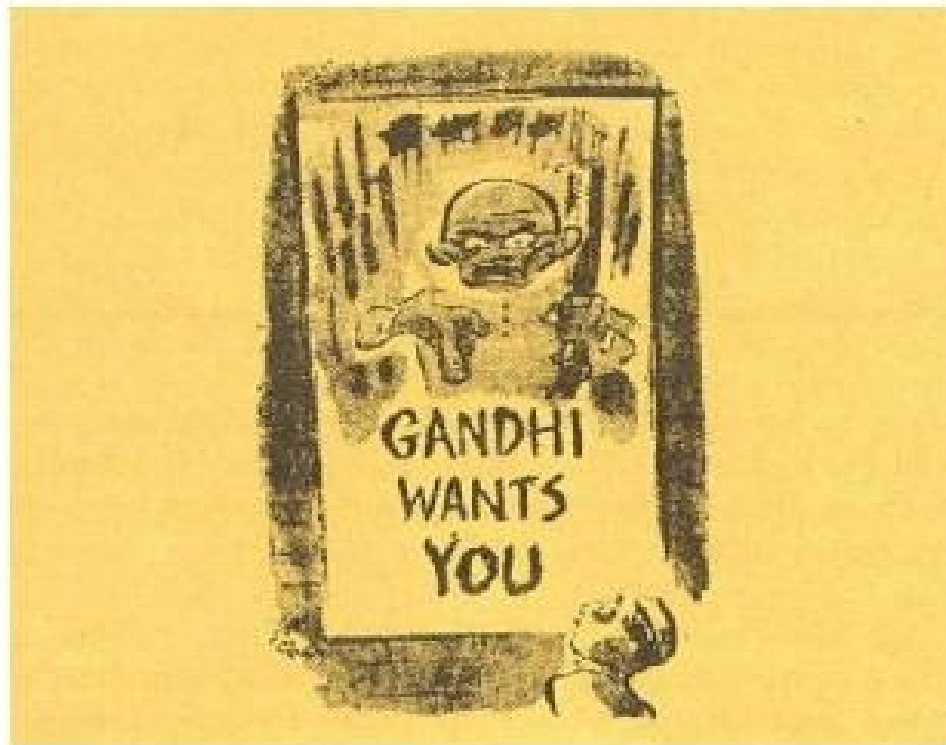


Vietnam: Socialism or pacifism? - John Sullivan



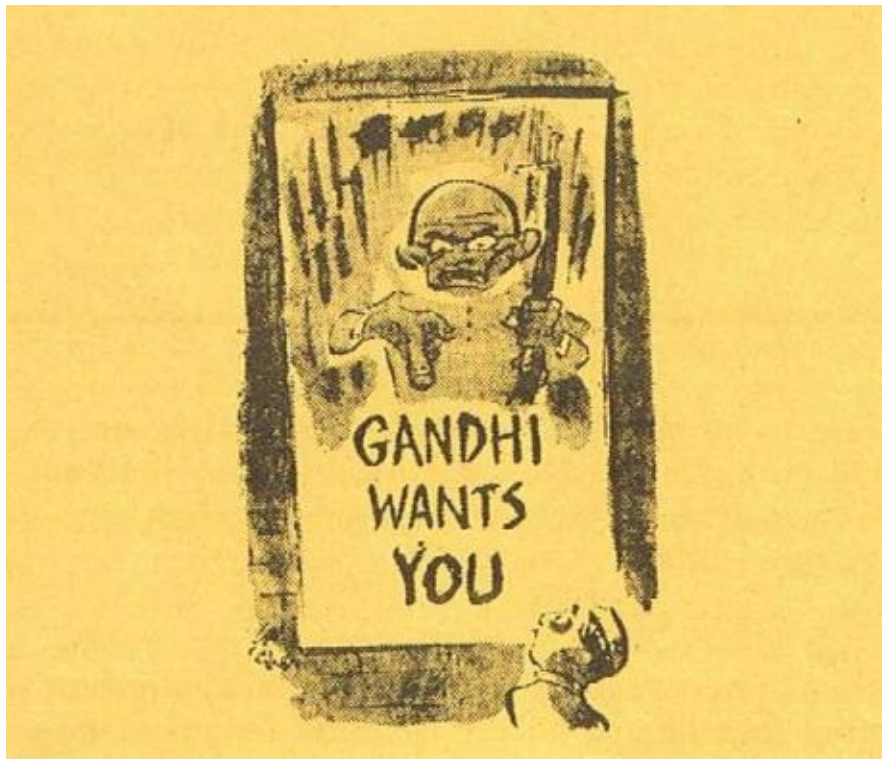
Article written by John Sullivan, expert on Spanish politics and famous for his satirical pieces on the British left in 1966. This article is significant because it demonstrates the plurality of views within Solidarity and was also written during the group's move away from 'the peace milieu'.

As the war in Vietnam increasingly becomes a central issue, the uneasy alliance between socialist and pacifists which has been a feature of political life during the past few years must inevitably disintegrate.

Socialists have no alternative but to support all struggles against imperialism while remaining sceptical about the possibility of these struggles leading to the establishment of a democratic or socialist society. They cannot condemn all parties equally for their use of violence as the pacifists do. Socialists recognize that where the objective prerequisites for socialism do not exist (as in the case in all undeveloped countries) the struggle against imperialism should still be supported.

There is a difficulty in determining the precise attitude which we should take to particular national liberation movements: they arise out of circumstances different from ours and therefore we will find it impossible fully to identify ourselves with them. We can legitimately criticize the uncritical acclaim which some socialists have given to colonial nationalist leaders, but it would be a pity if socialists became so engrossed in internal polemics that they neglect to make the more basic distinction between the socialist and the liberal-pacifist position.

Anyone who claims that socialists can support only socialist demands rejects the whole tradition of anti-colonialism in the Labour movement. If there are almost no struggles which qualify for our support, what is the point of calling ourselves socialist or engaging in anything



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Anyone who claims that socialists can support only socialist demands rejects the whole tradition of anti-colonialism in the Labour movement. If there are almost no struggles which qualify for our support, what is the point of calling ourselves socialist or engaging in anything

but purely educational activities? Those who claim to be socialist but remain indifferent to such struggles reduce socialism to an abstract ideal, not as the culmination of peoples' real struggles in the real world.

A more sophisticated case for abstention states that struggles for national independence which in the past were worth of support are no longer so, because of the involvement of the great powers. The Vietnamese are 'unconscious pawns in this world-wide struggle' 1 –

therefore we are absolved from any duty of solidarity with the Vietnamese or any other colonial revolution. Peter cadogan has stated that it is a slander to equate the Vietcong's struggle withthat of the Resistance to the Nazis during the war. This attitude combines a highly romanticized picture of the Resistance with residual assumptions of European racial superiority. Both Bob Potter's and Peter Cadogan's attitudes are only possible for those who lack all sense of urgency about the dilemma of the countries under imperialist domination.

The Vietnamese are not 'unconscious pawns' They are compelled to fight in conditions not of their own making, and to obtain arms wherever they can (in practice Moscow or Peking) .

Certainly this distorts and cripples their revolution, in the same way that the Resistance was fatally compromised by its involvement with the Allies, its only course of assistance.

This brings me to the crux of our differences with the pacifists. The fact that we both criticize Moscow and Peking should not be allowed ot obscure the fact that

our criticisms are not the same. They are in fact diametrically opposed!

The socialist criticism of Peking/Moscow is essentially the same as our criticism of Stalin's role in Spain. It is that their aid to the Vietnamese guerrillas is limited, conditional, and aimed at serving the interests of their own foreign policy. The pacifist criticism of Peking/Moscow is that they send arms at all! They see the solution to the Vietnam war in a negotiated agreement, not in an American defeat.

Significantly, India is the pacifist's favourite example of a national independence movement.

Here a bourgeois nationalist party was able to achieve independence from Britain, while keeping mass involvement in the struggle to a minimum and leaving an archaic social structure intact: conflict was channelled in the direction of communal massacres. But a movement like the Vietcong which can only exist if it retains the support of the mass of the population cannot stop short at mere formal independence, whatever the wishes of its leaders.

While a regular army can be the instrument of a policy conceived by others, the Vietnam guerrilla movement is not the unconscious tool of foreign powers. Within the limits imposed by the necessity of obtaining aid from Moscow or Peking the movement does pursue its own objectives. Socialists are aware of the limitations of these struggles but have no alternative but to support them.

However sceptical we may be about the successful outcome of the Vietnamese struggle and however little inclined to indulge in a romantic worship of violence we must recognize that the Vietnamese have no alternative but to resist American aggression. No socialist can criticize them for their resort to arms.

The pacifists' reiteration of their traditional refusal to distinguish between the violence of the oppressors and of the oppressed should encourage us to take stock of the condition of the Peace Movement.

It is beside the point to criticize today's Peace Movement for being ineffective. This assumes that the function of the movement is to achieve some external end. But the real function of the Peace Movement's activity is to reinforce the participant's self-esteem. The predilection of the remnants of the Peace Movement for rural demonstrations is extremely significant. The beauty of a rural demonstration is that one is relieved of the necessity of mingling with

outsiders. The Peace Movement has become a semi-religious cult with its own ritual, customs, and uniform. Rural demonstrations are the equivalent of Christian retreats. Certainly this kind of secularized Christianity is relatively harmless and is at least preferable to support for Billy Graham or adherence to Zen Buddhism. But it has nothing to do with the problems which ordinary face today and it does not provide a suitable milieu for socialist activities.

A decomposing movement tends to produce strange and exotic growths. We have already seen the appearance of a Narodnik-Terrorist tendency ('Scots against War'). It is time for socialists to abandon this stinking corpse before the Christians and the pseudo-anarchists are joined by spiritualists, phrenologists, and all the sad company of utopians. It may be difficult for many socialists to sever their connection with the pacifist movement – after all many of them came from it. But continued association with it is now not merely time-wasting but deeply compromising.

john sullivan

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Marky b's blog



1. Vietnam by Bob Potter (Solidarity pamphlet No. 20, p.3)